

The truth will out about army deaths

Nathan Bleaken and Beth Mellor speak exclusively to the bereaved parents of Private Geoff Gray from Hackney as Philip Ralph's *Deep Cut* comes to London



From left, Private Geoff Gray, from Hackney, who was found dead at Deepcut barracks in 2001, and Robert Blythe as ballistic weapons expert Frank Swann in *Deep Cut*

STANDING on the doorstep of her house in Victoria Park, Diane Gray knew the army officer in front of her was not telling her everything. Something must be wrong, she thought, for a military official and a priest to pay her a visit at nine o'clock in the morning. "I started shouting 'Just tell me what happened! Just tell me!'" she says.

Mrs Gray's son, Geoff, a former pupil of Lauriston School in Hackney, was 17 and was

'Geoff's body was found lying next to the perimeter fence'

serving in the army at the Deepcut barracks in Surrey.

Eight hours before the army officer turned up on the Gray's doorstep, Geoff's body had been found lying next to the perimeter fence of the barracks. He had two gunshots to his forehead. The officer told Diane Gray that her son had committed suicide.

Geoff's death, in September 2001, was the third 'suicide' at the army base in six years. In June 1995, Sean Benton, 20, was found with five bullet wounds to his chest. Five months later the body of 18-year-old Cheryl James was discovered just outside the camp with a fatal bullet to her head.

Later, in March 2002, 17-year-old James Collinson was found dead near the perimeter fence of the camp with a gunshot wound.

Seven years on from the Deepcut deaths, the families hope that a play at the Tricycle Theatre will generate enough public interest to force the government to hold a public inquiry into the alleged suicides.

The production, written by Philip Ralph, focuses on the death of Cheryl James and the effect it has had on her family. Yet the representation of grief, despair and hopelessness accurately portrays what all of the families went through, say Geoff Gray's parents.

None of the families of the Deepcut four accept the verdict from the Ministry of Defence (MOD) that their children committed suicide.

"The night Geoff died he was on guard duty. He left the gate to patrol around the fence, shots were heard and a search party was sent to look for Geoff. They looked along the fence three times before they found his body," says Geoff's father.

Although there were reports that intruders had been seen and the fence had been heard rattling, the MOD did not hesitate to conclude that Geoff had committed suicide. "Geoff was gushing every time he came home from the army - he loved it," says Mrs Gray.

There is just as much mystery surrounding the deaths of the other three young soldiers.

The play is set in the sitting room of Cheryl James's family and lurches between narratives of

Cheryl's parents, Cheryl's Deepcut colleague Private Jonesy and individuals involved in the subsequent investigation.

Rhian Blythe, as Private Jonesy, describes the chaotic

'This play should force the government to hold an enquiry'

night that Cheryl died, with loud gunshots ringing out in the theatre to mark the moment of her death.

Philip Ralph has cleverly crafted the character of Brian Cathcart, a journalist who has written extensively about the case, to fill in the background to the complicated Deepcut case for the audience. Short monologues and haunting photographs illustrate the other deaths at the barracks.

Mr Cathcart describes the culture of bullying and lack of discipline at the base, which was home to a thousand teenagers who were free to go out drinking, party in empty accommodation blocks and have numerous sexual relationships.

Frank Swann, a ballistic weapons expert, provides compelling evidence to prove that Private Gray could not have shot himself twice in the forehead.

But when Nicholas Blake QC undertook a judicial review of the Deepcut inquiries, Swann refused to participate. He believed that because it was to be

held behind closed doors, the verdict was already decided: the deaths were suicide.

Geoff's father believes that Mr Swann should have given evidence to the inquiry. Despite this, the pair remain in contact and Mr Swann says that he would be willing to take part in an open and fair trial with the power of subpoena.

This dilemma is summed up perfectly in the play by Cheryl's father. "We shouldn't have agreed to the inquiry," he says. "The verdict was decided long before they started, but if we didn't, well, then they would have said they had given us the chance and we had refused."

The script was written verbatim from transcripts of interviews and reports published about the deaths. Author Philip Ralph says he hopes that this means there will be no way that people can undermine the play's message. "Don't embellish. Don't exaggerate. Tell the truth. Stick to it," is the mantra of his writing.

The families still hope that a public inquiry will take place. Until then, the frustration and anguish portrayed in the production will continue. "I can't tell you the number of times that my husband has thrown his mobile phone across the room after speaking to people about Geoff's case. But we'll carry on until we find the truth," says Mrs Gray.

***Deep Cut* runs from March 10 until April 4 at the Tricycle Theatre, Kilburn. Ticket prices range from £10.00 to £20.00.**

60 Seconds



Former *EastEnders* actress Jessie Wallace chats to Alison Battisby

What made you decide to star in the *Vagina Monologues*?

Well I've done the play twice before and really enjoyed it, but this time I jumped at the chance to star at the Hackney Empire. Eve Ensler, the author, wrote the play about ten years ago after interviewing people from all over the world and they are performed as monologues. I read one in American, one in a Bronx accent, and one in cockney. It's such a great play to do, some of it is really serious and poignant, and other bits are hilarious so it's a real mixture.

What part of the play do you enjoy the most?

I really enjoy the scene where I get the audience chanting "****". I love shocking the audience, and I do it in a tongue in cheek way. I have never seen anybody leave the show, but I wouldn't be surprised if they did.

Are you excited to come to Hackney?

Well, I live in Essex so it's not that far, and all my family are from the East End, so I wanted to perform somewhere where they could all come and see me. I will be making my friends and family come to see the show.

Do you get on well with the other cast members?

I haven't met Jocelyn (Jee) yet as we haven't had rehearsals yet, but I have starred in the play with Sharon (D. Clarke) before, and had such a laugh. The play is great bonding session for women so I'm sure we'll all get on great.

Do you prefer acting on television to in theatre?

Oh it's definitely theatre that I love doing. I prefer doing it because I love that buzz that you get from performing in front of a live audience. I didn't like the tabloid media that went with doing television, I don't miss it. It is so much classier to do theatre as well, and it's so enjoyable going to work every evening.

Jessie Wallace will be starring alongside Sharon D. Clarke and Jocelyn Jee in the *Vagina Monologues* at the Hackney Empire from April 2 until April 5.

Tickets are priced between £17.50 and £19.50 and concessions are available. See www.hackneyempire.co.uk.